

# Short Tales of Terror

by ChucklesTheClown

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Summary: A series of Halo based short stories that are filled with surprises, suspense and terror.

## 1. Quarantined Space

**\*\*Short Tales of Terror (1): Quarantined Space\*\***

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**\*\*\_QUARANTINED SPACE: \_Specific areas of space declared off-limits by the UNSC for both military and civilian ships.\*\*** On April 24, 2477 the entire crew of the UNSC cruiser Malta disappeared during a three minute jump through uncharted space. When three search and rescue ships met the same unexplained fate, the UN quickly passed a law giving them the power to quarantine. In order to guard against overuse, the law stated that this drastic step could be taken only after an area had three or more deadly and unexplained incidents. Thus, in the seventy-five years since the law was created, only three regions of space earned the dubious distinction. They are so rare, in fact, that most UNSC Captains serve their entire careers without having to make a single course-correction due to a quarantined zone.

**\* \* \***

>Dark, twisted dreams slowly dissolved, swirling into a vortex around him and filling the air until he could no longer breathe. Breaking away from the whole, a small part of him began to laugh. <em>So this will be the end of the great Daniel Blaine€"choking to death on a dream?<em> The voice began laughing so hard that it had to pause. Breathe! Breathe, stupid! Isn't that something that all ODST's can do? Then suck in some air and get into the fight!\_ Again, Danny's

lungs strained to take a breath, but it was no use. Now desperate, his body began to convulse with painful, would-be coughs. \_That's it, Danny boy! Gotta get that snake out of your windpipe before you can get any air in! Oh, I love to see you like this!\_

Blaine's eyes suddenly opened, first to an unfocused blur, and then to a wide, toothy grin. His body pitched forward violently in another panicked attempt to pull in air—and this time he felt the cryo-inhalant move a fraction of a centimeter up his throat. Strong hands pulled him out of the open tube, balanced him upright and then delivered a powerful blow to his naked abdomen. Thick, green liquid exploded out of his mouth in a long, unbroken line.

"That's it, Danny boy!" Again, the voice dissolved into laughter. Blaine coughed violently for nearly a minute before spitting up the last of the inhalant. He began to fall forward, but hands again took hold of him, this time leading him to a bench. Connor O'Neil could not wipe the smile off of his face as he looked at his shivering, naked friend. "Yes indeed, you are a sight! As much as I hate to spoil this perfect moment, I'm afraid you have to clean up and get dressed. Today we get a rare treat."

Blaine placed his elbows on top of his legs, hunched his head towards the floor and concentrated on breathing. "I don't know, Connie, it'd be hard to top this."

"I'll let you decide that one." O'Neil sat down on the bench to Danny's left. "The \_Celeste's\_ AI woke the Captain about an hour ago. It seems we've gone a bit off course . . . and into quarantined space. Oooh, this could get spooky!"

"Quarantine?" Blaine looked up. "Which one?"

"\_Allentown, Hendricks \_and\_ White.\_" Connor had always thought it a bit ghoulish of the UN to name the quarantined areas for the ships involved, in this case a UNSC frigate and two small civilian vessels; but it did serve to drive the point home.

Daniel sat up in surprise. "That one? Wow."

"Yeah, exactly what I thought, Danny boy." O'Neil chuckled, making his flat belly shake. "It's the one I'd have chosen, I mean, if we'd had our pick. Traipsing around the galaxy in this dreary little frigate has been the most boring nine months of my short life. Thank God something's finally happened."

Blaine shook his head and then looked at his friend with mock fear. "If the stories about this place are true Connie, I don't think \_God\_ is the one you ought to be thanking."

"Chilling Dan, positively chilling. Now get dressed—we're already overdo for the bridge."

"The bridge?" Blaine asked as he stood to his feet. Connor nodded.

"Yes indeed. The Captain himself sent me to wake you. Apparently," O'Neil said in a playfully ominous tone, "the Devil couldn't wait to get started. Something has already happened, and judging from the tremor in the Captain's voice, it's something pretty cute." Connor

smiled. "With the Devil about, us ODST's are finally needed again. 'Feet first into Hell,' without even using an HEV! Like I said Danny boy, we're in for a real treat."

\* \* \*

>Ten minutes later, Blaine and O'Neil arrived on the bridge in their full gear. Captain Mickey Harmon stood in the back of the room, staring at a small video display on the wall. The Communications Officer, Lieutenant Bonnie Horowitz, stood to his right, holding a hand over her mouth like a teenager watching scary movie. In the haste to get to her station, the beautiful young woman had uncharacteristically put her long, blonde hair in a ponytail. Connor, who had a weakness for blondes, long hair <em>and<em> ponytails, smiled as he nodded his approval. Quarantined space? \_So far, so good.\_ After a few moments the Captain turned his head.

"Sergeant Blaine," he quickly waved the two ODST's over, "It's about time."

"Sir, my apologies for the delay. I have a slight reaction to cryoâ€" "

"No time for that son." The Captain ran a hand through his short, black hair. "I'm certain Sergeant O'Neil has informed you that we've somehow entered quarantined space. Our worthless AI decided to yank me out of cryo after it was too late. I guess that was easier than steering us clear," he looked up, now addressing the AI directly, "huh, Mary?" A thin, ghostly apparition appeared behind him. The barely visible face was expressionless; her eyes nose and mouth like holes cut in a sheet for Halloween. Mary's tone was as flat as her expression.

"Captain, as I have already pointed out, the error was systemic. Core references were altered, thus altering our perceived position. I woke you the moment the error reversed itself. With respect, Captain, we have yet to complete the Malta Protocol. Perhaps we could discuss this later?"

Blaine shook his head. "The Malta Protocol?"

"It's a checklist." Harmon said impatiently, "Full of things we have to catalogue and examine before exiting the quarantine zone. It's also the reason I woke you two from cryo. The first step in the protocol is a visual inspection of the entire ship, so half an hour ago I sent men to search the decks. One of them failed to return. I tried to use the ship's surveillance to see what had happened, but every camera in that area is out. Now that's strange, because every other camera in the ship is working fine. I sent two more men into the area, but they also disappeared." He pointed towards the video screen on the wall. "That's from a camera in the helmet of my XO. A couple of minutes before you arrived, I sent him with nine heavily armed men." Harmon gave Blaine a scolding look. "Now, that was supposed to be \_you\_ leading those men, soldier, so you had better pray to God that he makes it out of there alive."

Suddenly the voice of his XO, Lieutenant James Zorch, crackled from the COM on the bridge. \_"Captain, we're almost there. It's just ahead."\_

Daniel leaned forward and looked at the screen. "Sir, what area is it?"

"Aft 'C' deck." And then giving the ODST a you-are-not-going-to-believe-this look, he added, "The morgue."

"Okay, it's just around the corner up here." Metallic clicks filled the COM as everyone behind Lieutenant Zorch chambered a round. The image on the small screen crawled slowly forward, with the tip of the XO's shotgun barrel barely visible at the bottom. The camera came up to the turn, began to peak around the corner—and the video screen went blank.

Harmon cast a stoic glance at Lieutenant Horowitz. "Check the connection." Before Bonnie could even acknowledge the order, a horrible scream blared from the COM, followed immediately by more screams—and then a sudden, jarring silence as the audio went dead.

The Captain tapped his COM. "Jimmy? Hello? Are you there? \_Jimmy?\_" Silence. He turned to the ODST's standing next to him and they immediately noticed a change. The tired informality Harmon had shown only moments before had vanished, replaced now by the calm efficiency of a seasoned officer.

"The morgue is located," Bonnie handed him a data pad and he pointed to a map of the ship on the screen, "right here. Other than ourselves, only my XO and twelve members of the \_Celeste's\_ security force have been roused from cryo. Do you two know the men on Sergeant Brunink's security team by sight?"

They both nodded. "Yes, sir." After nine long months, they knew \_everyone\_ by sight.

"Good. If you see anybody else walking around, use lethal force. I don't care who it is: kill them without hesitation."

"Yes, sir."

The Captain placed a hand on Blaine's shoulder. "Son, I wish I had some more men to send with you."

"With respect, sir, I think the two of us will be plenty." Danny wanted to say that sending \_two\_ ODST's was not only overkill, but also downright unfair to whatever it was they were going to fight. Unfortunately, such a statement would be taken as disrespect for the team Harmon had already sent. But Blaine did not mean any disrespect. Brunink's men were good soldiers, but sometimes 'good' is not enough. Sometimes you need ODST's.

Sometimes you need the best.

\* \* \*

>Less than five minutes later, Blaine and O'Neil stepped out of an elevator and on to 'C' deck. Some parts of the ship rotated to simulate gravity, and some did not. Thankfully, this was one of the areas that did. Both soldiers turned and looked to the aft of the ship, towards their objective. Just over one hundred meters ahead,

the hallway they were standing in made a ninety-degree turn to port. The morgue's entrance was located immediately around the corner to the right. In order to get there, the ODST's would have to walk past three intersecting-hallways and almost fifty doors. Nothing about this mission would be quick.<p><p>

With Danny on the right and Connor on the left, they made their way slowly down the hall. Every corner and doorway was approached with great caution, as if it concealed an enemy. For the first time in their nine-month deployment, Blaine gave thought to the color of the walls: something in-between gray and green. The degree to which their black armor differentiated from their surroundings had to be taken into account, so the matter was far from trivial. Sad fact was, whatever name this color went by, they stuck out like missing teeth in a toothy grin. As they approached the halfway point, Blaine stopped.

"Okay, Connie, I'm going to take a look."

About three meters behind him, his partner also came to a stop. "Roger that. I've got your six." Danny pulled out a pair of binoculars and studied the corner nearly fifty meters ahead.

"I don't see anything. No blood, no bodies, no nothing."

O'Neil chuckled. "Sounds like you're disappointed."

"No, but judging from those screams . . . I guess I expected to see \_something.\_" As if in response to his words, every light in the hallway suddenly went out. "I know, Connie—" "I should've kept my mouth shut." Danny waited for the sarcastic reply, but instead heard a loud, sickening 'crack', followed by a soft gurgling sound. "Connie?" Instinctively, he turned to check on him, but the hallway was still black as pitch. Even though his helmet usually took only a few seconds to switch to night-vision, Blaine found himself in total darkness for the better part of a minute. Finally able to see, he turned to get a visual on Connor—and his blood went cold. His partner had vanished.

"Connie?" The gurgling continued for several seconds and then ended in the long, wet rattle of escaping air. Danny was well acquainted with the sights and sounds of death, having spent over a decade as an ODST, so he knew that he had just heard the death rattle of his best friend. Taking a deep breath, he tried to push it aside. \_Continue the mission. Fight now, grieve later.\_

"Captain," Blaine said, somehow keeping his voice from shaking, "I've just lost O'Neil." Seconds passed, but there was no reply. "Captain?" Again he waited and again heard only silence. "Can \_anyone\_ hear me?" Dead air delivered the answer with cold, silent finality. Danny was about to start moving when he heard a faint, ghostly voice speak through the COM; the words flowing together like a toneless, whispered song.

"\_I heeeear yooooou, Danneeeee Boooooy.\_" It was Connie's voice. Blaine glanced up and down the hall, which suddenly looked eerie and haunted in the grainy black and white of his night vision. For the first time since high school, he felt the icy grip of fear.

"C-Connie?" Almost before the word left his lips, he regretted saying

it. Connor O'Neil was dead. Whoever was speaking through his COM, was not him. Even so, the reply sent chills down his spine.

"\_Yesssss. It'ssssss sooo coooold innnnn heeeeere. Pleeeeeze hurreeeeee.\_" A wonderful, lifelong friendship had just been reduced to baiting and cruel mockery. Blaine squeezed his eyes shut, balled his right hand into a fist and then slammed it bitterly into the wall beside him.

"\_Ooooh, I looooooove to seeeeee yooooo liiiike thisssssss.\_"

Suddenly, a powerful, smoldering anger began to engulf Danny, pushing aside his fear and bringing clarity to his mind. Oh, you're gonna pay dearly for that. He slung his battle rifle behind his back, grabbed his shotgun and then chambered a round. Blaine considered telling the filth on the other side of the COM what he thought of him and his cowardly tactics, but decided against it. Even in his youth, Danny had never been much of a trash-talker. He found it much more satisfying to let his actions do the talking for him—and his actions could talk with profound eloquence.

Again, Blaine started moving down the hall, using the same caution he had before. But as the corner drew closer, keeping a firm hold on his mind became more and more difficult. Although his night-vision gear was excellent, the total darkness surrounding him tested its operational limits. Phantom images appeared on the screen for fractions of a second at a time as the software fought to discern the surroundings. For a man who had been yanked from cryo-sleep and listened to his best friend die in the span of an hour, these visual anomalies became a waking nightmare. More than once, Dan thought he saw a twisted, leering face peak around the corner by the morgue. Phantom arms waved, ghostly apparitions appeared in his peripheral vision and, most troubling of all, he swore that he kept seeing Connie moving up the other side of the hallway.

Finally, there were no more doors or intersecting hallways to pass. Now nothing but ten meters of empty space stood before him and his objective. Stopping for a moment, Blaine took a deep breath. This is it. You're an ODS and this piece of crap killed your partner. Take him apart. Do it for Connie.

With renewed focus, Danny moved forward along the right side of the hallway, finally stopping at the end of the wall. Standing at the corner, he sucked in a deep breath and prepared to go around. Even with his night vision gear, Blaine could see his knuckles turn white as he gripped his shotgun. One, two, three—

Danny whipped around the corner and leveled his weapon . . . at empty space. No blood, no bodies, nothing. Suddenly he heard ghostly, whispered laughter in his helmet. Again, fear threatened to paralyze him, and again he reached for anger. He remembered Connie as a kid, banging on his door before sunrise on Christmas morning to show him what he'd got. He remembered going from restaurant to restaurant the night they graduated from high school, wearing their gowns like Halloween costumes. He could still remember the look on Connie's face when he found out that they had both made it into the ODS's. And most of all, he remembered the final, pointless death of the best friend any guy could hope for. On the right side of the hallway just a few meters away, the entrance to the morgue loomed like a doorway

to Hell. \_Just like you promised, Connie; feet first with no HEV.\_

Setting aside all caution, Blaine ran to the door, yanked it open and walked in. Since the remains of most enlisted men were released into space, only three bodies had been placed in the morgue during their nine-month deployment. But as he looked at the three-tiered racks that ran along the wall to his left and right, his mouth dropped open. Every man the Captain had sent lay upon on the racks; grotesque, twisted and dead. With arms dangling and legs jutting into the aisle, the bodies looked as if they had been tossed hastily upon the cold steel by the hands of a careless god. At the far end of the room, the naked body of a civilian who had died aboard the ship several months before, lay upon the floor like a discarded suit. As Danny stared at the corpse through the grainy, gray eyes of his night vision equipment, he came to a horrible realization: it \_was\_ a discarded suit.

Suddenly, Blaine saw movement behind the racks on the far right side of the room. A helmeted figure walked into the aisle, stepped over the body and stopped about two meters in front of him. With stiff robotic movements, the arms slowly removed the helmet; painfully confirming what Danny had already guessed.

Connie's dead face leered at him with wide eyes, a crooked smile and joyful malice. The obviously broken neck tilted sideways so far that it almost rested on the right shoulder. As he looked at the articulated body of his best friend, a lump formed in Blaine's throat. Everything told him that he was staring at Connor O'Neilâ€"everything except the expression. It was cruel, hateful, demonicâ€"\_evil.\_

Once again, the voice of his dead friend whispered in his helmet. "\_Hellooooo, Danneeeee booooooy.\_" The Connor-thing smiled wider and stared at him with dry, dead eyes. Turning sideways, it pointed a stiff finger towards the naked body in the aisle. "\_Yooour bodeeez laaaasssst ooonleeeee aaaaaa sshooooort tiiiiime.\_" It turned back towards Danny and looked him over as if he were a suit and slacks. "\_Thaaaat iiiiiissssssss whyyyyyyyy weeeeeee neeeeeeed sooooooo maaaaaaneeee of yooooooooou. Buuuut fiiiiirst yooooou muuuust diiiiiiiiie.\_" It took a single, grotesque step towards Blaine. "\_Wiiiiithooooooooout bodeeez weeeeeee haaaaave noooothiing.\_"

The voice, which up until now had been a ghostly, toneless whisper, changed; and Danny had no reference for it. It was the voice of fire and wind and thunder and crashing waves; of the deafening silence of empty space and the bottomless rumble of colliding planets: all at once, and as focused as a laser-beam.

"But \_with\_ them we have everything. They wear out, but we do not. Our time in them is short. We need \_all\_ of you." Suddenly an expression came across it's face: an expression that man in his frailty was never meant to witness or endure. Danny could feel the life wither within him, like ice dangled over flame. It spoke again, and it's voice shook the metal racks around them.

\_"Ruin! So little time to ruin! Because you are weak, our time for ruin is short!"\_

An odd question suddenly occurred to Blaine, entering his mind with such force that he could not help but open his mouth and ask. "But," Danny said, somehow finding the power to speak, "why I am still alive? Why are you telling me this?" Ultimately, it did not matter where the question had come from, or why Blaine had even thought to ask it. What mattered was that it was the right question. A genuine look of confusion twisted across the thing's face, and it was immediately clear that it had no answer. Then, during it's moment of doubt, the deadly stare liftedâ€"if only for a few seconds. But this thing would learn what thousands of dead enemies had already found out: a few seconds is all an ODS'T needs.

The doubt passed, the deadly look returned, and again Danny could feel his life dissolving away. Even so, as the ODS'T Sergeant managed to look his enemy straight in the eye and crack a final, cocky smile. Goodbye. He opened his hands and two grenades dropped to the floor, rolled towards the Connor-thing and stopped at it's feet. It looked down, and again, it's expression spoke volumes. Yes, it was afraid of grenades; yes, it could die.

Blaine saw a bright flash, felt a concussive force and then . . . nothing. He found himself floating in a soft, silent void. The dark, twisted dream slowly dissolved, swirling into a vortex around him and filling the air until he could no longer breathe. Breaking away from the whole, a small part of him began to laugh. So this will be the end of the great Daniel Blaineâ€"choking to death on a dream? The voice began laughing so hard that it had to pause. Breathe! Breathe, stupid! Isn't that something that all ODS'T's can do? Then suck in some air and get into the fight! Again, Danny's lungs strained to take a breath, but it was no use. Now desperate, his body began to convulse with painful, would-be coughs. That's it, Danny boy! Gotta get that snake out of your windpipe before you can get any air in! Oh, I love to see you like this!

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"That's it, Danny boy!" Again, the voice dissolved into laughter. Blaine coughed violently for nearly a minute before spitting up the last of the inhalant. He began to fall forward, but hands again took hold of him, this time leading him to a bench. Connor O'Neil could not wipe the smile off of his face as he looked at his shivering, naked friend. "Yes indeed, you are a sight! As much as I hate to spoil this perfect moment, I'm afraid you have to clean up and get dressed. Today we get a rare treat."

Blaine placed his elbows on top of his legs, hunched his head towards the floor and concentrated on breathing. "I don't know, Connie, it'd be hard to top this."

"I'll let you decide that one." O'Neil sat down on the bench to Danny's left. "The Celeste's AI woke the Captain about an hour ago. It seems we've gone a bit off course . . . and into quarantined space. Oooh, this could get spooky!" Blaine looked up, and his expression caused Connor to lean backwards.



"\_Quarantine?\_ Did the Captain send you to get me?"

Connor gave him a strange look. "Yeah, Danny. Apparently something strange has already happened. You feeling okay?"

\_Oh God, how could this be?\_ "Yeah, I'm fine. Call the Captain, Connie. Tell him I'm aware of the situation and to have all of his men stay on the bridge. Me and you can handle it alone."

"But Danny, Iâ€"

"Do it \_now!\_"

O'Neil gave him a funny look, nodded and then contacted Harmon. By the time he was through, Blaine had already geared up.

"Well, that was quick even for you. So where are we off to, my psychic friend?"

Blaine pointed towards a table across the room. "Grab me that data pad." Connor snapped off a crisp, mocking salute.

"Yes, sir!" The moment he turned his back, Danny's fist crashed into the side of his head, knocking him out cold. Moving quickly, Blaine caught his friend and laid him gently on the floor.

"Sorry, Connie," he said as tears began to fill his eyes and run down his cheeks, "but you can't come, not this time. Goodbye, old friend." He had knelt down as a grieving, emotional man saying farewell to a life-long friend.

He stood up an ODST.

Eyes clear and focused, gear packed and ready, he headed towards the morgue. It was time to die, time to killâ€"time to \_ruin.\_

C.T. Clown

## 2. Granny Mat Station

**\*\*Granny Mat Station\*\***

\* \* \*

>It has been said that for a book to be written concerning the dos and don'ts of outer space, the dead would need to author it. But there is no such book and thus men travel space by the cold, merciless laws of trial and error; ignorant of the bends, dips and eddies in the river of existence. If, however, the dead were able to publish such warnings from beyond the grave, they would doubtlessly devote an entire chapter to the subject of games. For the dead know that in certain regions of space, some games do more than dispel boredom: some games <em>kill.</em>

Something about the setting made it right for a bit of fear. As many soldiers can tell youâ€"some with a smile, others with cautionâ€"deep space is a strange and sometimes disquieting place that sets an eerie tone that no wilderness campfire can match. \_Granny Mat Station\_ had

the distinction of being humanity's most distant outpost. As one of the twenty-eight small, sparsely crewed detection facilities forming a ring around the surviving colonies, it had a single mission: report any possible Covenant activity within their operational grid. The station and its three-man crew orbited a Mars sized planet that had a jet-black surface and a classified name. Since their equipment had detected nothing more threatening than an asteroid during their two-year deployment, they busied themselves with staying busy: telling stories and making up games to pass the time.

Kale sat in the small, dark room, looking from face to face as his eyes slowly adjusted to the low light. It was Thursday and that meant it was his turn to pick the game. And since it was Kale, it also meant the game would be scary. Neither Scott nor Chris would admit it, but Thursday was their favorite game night. After all, in their cramped little prison, fear was the only roller-coaster that they could ride; and nobody did fear better than Kale.

"Guys, I have three easy questions." A smile twisted across his thin white face. "And I guarantee, after you've answered them, you'll want to sleep with the light on. Now, whoever goes first will be at a big disadvantage, since he won't know where the questions are leading. Which of you is brave enough to start?"

Scott waved his hand in the air like a grade-schooler. "I'll start, as long as everyone swears that they will play. I'm not getting stuck like last time." After the other two nodded their heads in agreement, he looked up at Kale and smiled. "Okay, do your worst."

"Here's the first question, and if you lie to us, may your corpse rot on the black planet: what is the worst thing that you've ever done to somebody?"

Scott suddenly looked as if he'd seen a ghost. "I'll have to think about that," he said. But as his head drooped towards the floor it became clear that he knew exactly what it was. When he finally looked up, it was as if facing a hostile jury.

"Until I was nine years old I uh, lived next door to a girl named Kara." He took a deep breath. "She was a year younger than me and she did everything she could to drive me crazy. Seriously, I couldn't go outside without her calling me names or throwing rocks at me from the other side of our fence. It went way beyond irritating; it was maddening. I swear, she was that bad."

"We believe you," Kale said, suddenly wishing that they had played something else.

Scott looked at the floor. "What made it even worse was that her brother Nick was my best friend. So no matter where I went or what I did it seemed that I couldn't get away from her. Whenever I tried to get back at her I got in a lot of trouble because Kara was . . . because she was confined to a wheelchair. She had a serious birth defect and her legs were smaller than her arms. But believe me," he looked up again, eyes pleading, "that did not make her any less of a jerk."

"Look," Kale said, not wanting to hear any more, "Let's forget about it. This was a dumb idea."

Chris shook his head emphatically. "No, he promised. Besides, if he doesn't finish, I'll always imagine the worst. I'm holding him to his word." Scott shifted his gaze back to the floor and then continued.

"It was my birthday party and she had come with my friend. I mean, she came \_just\_ to bother me. Kara was even more hateful that day than usual and she was ruining my birthday. I became desperate for her to leave." He stopped for a moment, as if gathering the courage to continue. "She was allergic to peanuts, so I mixed a little peanut butter in with her ice cream. I thought that it would only cause her to break out in sores or something like it usually did, but it uh, it . . . " Kale was holding his breath, "it caused her throat to swell shut."

"My God," Chris whispered, inwardly kicking himself for making the game continue. Scott lowered his head even further and then spoke in a barely audible voice.

"Her face turned blue and her eyes," he took a deep breath, "her eyes bulged out in fear. And she died, just like that, right there in my kitchen. Nobody ever knew it was me."

The room suddenly filled with a paralyzing silence, and the air seemed thick and hot. What do you say when your friend admits to murdering a wheelchair-bound little girl? After several agonizing moments, Scott finally looked up.

"What's the second question?" Kale, who had completely forgot about the second question, nearly fell out of his chair.

"No, when I thought this up I had no idea thatâ€"

"Don't tell me 'no'!" Scott interrupted in sudden anger. "I did \_not\_ go through that for nothing! Give me the next \_freaking\_ question!" Kale had no idea what to do, so he just blurted it out.

"If that person were to die and then return from the grave this very night to exact vengeance, what would they do to you?"

Scott looked at them with lifeless eyes. "That's easy. She'd strangle the life out of me, just like I did her. You know, her parents made her use a hand-powered wheelchair." Now his eyes were distant, as if watching a movie of his past. "They said that it would be good for her; make her stronger. And they were right, too. Her bony little hands could grip like iron." As an eerie, humorless smile spread across his face, Kale felt a chill run down his spine. "What is the third question?"

"Come on, Scott, this is no longer a game! I'm not going to sit here and use the greatest tragedy of your life for amusement. For God's sake, let's do something else."

Scott spoke with barely controlled fury. "What was the \_question\_, Kale? It's way too late to back out of this."

Kale pursed his lips in frustration, shook his head, and then replied in an angry voice. "Fine. For question number three you have to choose a time: 1:00 am, 2:00 am or 3:00 am."

Scott looked confused. "A time for what?"

"I can't tell you that until after you pick."

"I'll take 3:00 a.m. Now tell me what the heck it means."

\_This game sucks.\_ "It means that tonight at that time, the one you wronged will come to your room," Kale had to look away, "and deliver the vengeance spoken by your own lips."

Scott sat silently, trying to mask his growing fear. Whether it was the effect of deep space, the prolonged seclusion or just plain guilt, he could not shake the feeling that he was now in danger.

Over the next fifteen minutes, Chris and Kale took their turns with the three questions; but since neither of them had murdered a little crippled girlâ€”or anybody else for that matterâ€”it was all rather anti-climactic. If the worst came true for the two of them that night, Chris would get sucker-punched at 1:00 am, and Kale would get his fingers stuck together with crazy-glue an hour later.

"Wow," Scott said, once they had finished, "I feel a \_lot\_ better now. You two were a real menace to society." Kale was not amused.

"Scott, do us all a favor and shut up! I gave you a chance to back out, but you didn't take it. For God's sake, why didn't you just lie?"

"Because I'm not a liar; I'm a \_killer\_."

Chris' face twisted in disgust. "Was that supposed to be funny?"

"Sorry guys," Scott said apologetically, "That was crass. It just feels freaky, you know, finally telling someone what happened. I've been carrying that around for a long time, and somehow keeping silent has made it impossible to move on. I didn't like Kara, but I didn't want her to die. I was just a mischievous nine year-old who had a prank go bad." He paused a moment, and then spoke as if receiving a sudden, unexpected revelation. "I'm \_not\_ evil."

For the first time since the beginning of the game, Kale smiled. It was time to cut Scott some slack. "Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. The way you clean me out playing poker, I figure you've made some sort of deal with the Devil." Chris leaned over and gave Scott a friendly slap on the back.

"Don't worry man, that story won't leave this room. But, dang, morbid or not, it sure put our stuff to shame."

Suddenly, something banged into the room's metal door from outside, causing all three men to jump. A moment later, they heard the metallic squeak of something rolling down the hall. They all sat silently as the strange noise became faint and finally disappeared. The room seemed darker than it had a moment before, and \_Granny Mat Station\_ suddenly began to feel sentient and menacing. It began to feel evil.

\* \* \*

>Ten minutes later, they sat in the main living room on the other side of the station. With every available light switched on and a cheery movie playing on the vid screen, they talked about happier things. Hours passed unnoticed as they guzzled coffee and lost themselves in purposely-pointless discussions. The fear that had oppressed and suffocated earlier in the night now seemed weak and distant: a shadowy remnant of silly paranoia that had no more basis in reality than a bad dream.<p><p>

"Did you know," Kale said to Chris, trying to keep a straight face, "that if you bite down on one of these mints really hard, it makes a spark?"

Chris raised an eyebrow. "A mint \_sparks\_?"

"Yeah," Scott said, nodding emphatically, "it's true." He scooped one out of a bowl on the coffee table and tossed it to Chris. "We'll turn off all the lights and you can stand in front of the mirror and see for yourself."

After searching their faces for signs of insincerity, Chris stood to his feet. "Okay, I'll try." He turned and walked towards the mirror on the wall behind them as the other two switched off every light in the room.

"Okay," Kale said, his ear-to-ear smile hidden by the darkness, "Now!" An incredibly loud crunching sound filled the darkness, followed immediately by the thump of bodies hitting the floor.

"Guys?" Chris said, but instead of a reply he heard hisses and soft gurgling. Suddenly the fear he had experienced earlier came back in a violent rush. Trying to stay calm, he felt his way along the wall to a light switch, flipped it onâ€"and his mouth dropped open.

Both Scott and Kale lay on the floor clutching their stomachs and trying in vain to breathe . . . as they convulsed in fits of tearful laughter.

"Maybe . . . maybe you didn't bite down \_hard\_ enough!" Kale said, and then dissolved once again into incoherent chuckling. Scott tried to say something too, but only managed to hyperventilate. It wouldn't have been so funny, except that they had nailed Chris with the same joke only a year before.

"Cute," Chris said with a red face. "I guess it doesn't take much to get you two going." Finally able to breathe normally, Kale stood to his feet.

"Hey, it's just a joke. You should be proud; that was a lot louder than the last time. I bet you almost \_did\_ get a spark!"

Chris glared. Joke or not, he still felt the sting of fear and embarrassment. He glanced up at the clock. "It's almost midnight guys and I'm heading to bed. See you in the morning."

"That late?" Scott said, turning to take a look for himself. "Dang. Yeah, I guess I will too. Who has first watch tomorrow?"

Kale smiled. "You do, 0500 sharp."

"That's great. I'll try not to wake you guys up," Scott said, suddenly feeling exhausted.

As Kale turned on some music and searched for an action flick, Scott left the warm bright room and headed down the hallway to his quarters. Movies, music and conversation had been more than enough to take his mind off Kale's ill-conceived game. Sitting in the living room, fear had seemed so far away that it was almost impossible to remember or imagine. But as he walked down the dim corridor, the lights and sounds of activity lessening with each step, his security was slowly consumed by darkness and silence.

Suddenly he heard a metallic squeaking sound, like a wheel that needed to be oiled. It was coming from somewhere behind him—and it was getting louder. A paralyzing chill slithered up his spine. It took all of his courage, but he finally stopped and looked backwards.

Nothing.

But the sound became louder still and Scott quickened his pace. When he finally arrived at his room he turned on the light and slammed the door shut. Without bothering to change clothes or turn off the lamp, he jumped into bed and buried himself under the blankets. He was nine years old again; hiding under his covers and tucking in every edge, lest a bony little hand find an opening to exact revenge.

But as powerful as his fear had become, Scott's fatigue was stronger still, and he was sound asleep within minutes.

\* \* \*

>Bright sunlight spilled into the living room through the large window, painting the wispy white curtains a fiery gold. Young children ran here and there wearing party hats and playing games. Nobody heard the doorbell—nobody that is, except Scott. After all, it was his birthday party. He turned nine today.<p><p>

He opened the door to a smiling boy holding a large, wrapped present. His best friend had finally arrived.

"Thank God, Nick," he said, waving him in, "We're about to cut the cake. What took?" His friend stayed on the porch and smiled weakly.

"Sorry, but Kara took forever getting ready."

"\_Kara?\_" Scott felt as if he had been punched in the gut. As if on cue, he heard the familiar metallic squeak of her wheelchair coming down the driveway.

"Sorry man, but my mom made me. She'll probably just leave after—" He was interrupted by a shrill voice.

"You have enough friends to throw a party?" Kara jeered as she wheeled up to the porch. Since she was allergic to bright light, she wore long sleeves, gloves and a hood over her head that made her look

like a miniature Grim Reaper. "Hard to believe." From underneath the brown hood, she glared hatefully at Nick. "Wait 'til I tell mom that you left me sitting outside!" She then spoke to Scott in a strange and chilling voice. "And wait 'til I tell her what you did to me!"

Nick gave his friend an apologetic glance. "Could you help me lift her?"

"Like I have a choice." The boys descended the three steps, stood on opposite sides and picked the chair up by its arms. A foul odor suddenly assaulted his nose. He remembered smelling it once before—at his Grandpa's funeral.

"You smell like trash!" Kara yelled, turning her hood towards Scott. "You'd better hope that you don't make my wheelchair stink!" He ignored her comment and, with great effort, lifted the chair to the top of the porch. Thankfully, she disappeared into the house the moment the wheels hit the ground.

Scott looked at his friend with weary eyes. "Why did she come?"

"Probably just to bother you. Ignore her. Besides," Nick picked up the present and smiled, "you are going to love what I got you."

"Scott!" his mom called from inside, "It's time for the cake!" The boys hurried through the now empty living room and into the dining area. All of the lights were off and everyone surrounded a rectangular table where nine candles burned on a round, three-layer cake. His mom looked at him and smiled.

"Blow them out before we have a riot!" Pushing two kids out of his way, he walked up to the table, leaned over and took a deep breath. But just before he blew, Scott glanced up at Kara, who was sitting directly across from him. Light from the candles flickered on her hooded face, illuminating only her mouth, which was twisted into a creepy, evil grin. Scott froze for a moment, but then lowered his eyes and let the air explode from his lungs. Kara spoke with disgust.

"Yuck! You spit all over the cake!" She looked up at his mother. "Do you have ice cream? I'm not having any cake."

"Yes, dear," she said, and then turned to her son. "Scott, go into the kitchen get Kara some chocolate ice cream." After giving his mother a blistering look, he stormed off. He had just put two scoops into a disposable bowl, when a thought invaded his brain.

She's allergic to peanuts. He stopped for a moment and thought about the little witch breaking out in a thousand little angry, itching sores. Just a spoonful of peanut butter and Kara will go home crying. Just a spoonful and she's gone.

After glancing to his left and right, Scott grabbed the small jar of peanut butter sitting at the back of the kitchen counter and spooned a little bit out. To his relief, it disappeared into the chocolate ice cream with only a few stirs. Stuffing his nerves down enough to pass for normal, he walked back into the dining room. His mother was

adjusting some decorations on the wall, but Kara was nowhere in sight.

"Mom," Scott said, holding the bowl away from his body as if it were a ticking bomb, "where'd she go?" He suddenly noticed that the house had become empty and silent.

"You mean Kara?" his mother said with wide eyes and a crooked, spooky smile that made his heart skip a beat. "She went looking for you." All of a sudden he could hear the metallic squeaking of Kara's wheelchair coming from somewhere in the house. "Can't you hear her, honey? \_She's right outside your door.\_"

Scott woke with a jump. Once his eyes were able to focus, he checked the clock next to his bed.

\_2:58 a.m.\_

As the last tendrils of sleep finally fell from his mind, Scott tried to escape the terror of a nightmare that had seemed all too real. Once again, exhaustion overcame fear and his eyelids became heavy. He pulled the covers up under his chin, took a deep breath—and heard a noise that almost made him faint. Something was rolling down the hallway with a familiar metallic squeak. As it came to a stop just outside his door, Scott's eyes turned to his clock.

\_3:00 a.m.\_

He stared at the doorway as all the blood drained from his face. It seemed that electricity shot through his entire body, causing every hair to stand on end. Was this someone's sick idea of a prank?

"Chris?" he said in a weak voice to whoever was on the other side of the door?

Silence.

"Kale, is that you?" Again, there was no response.

The doorknob began to turn.

Scott now gave himself wholly to panic, and did the only thing that seemed to make sense: he dove under his covers like a child and quickly tucked in every edge, lest a bony little hand find an opening to exact revenge. He heard his door swing open and his entire body began to shake. Suddenly the putrid smell of formaldehyde saturated the room with such force that Scott nearly threw up. The lights went out and the metallic squeak of a little girl's hand powered wheel chair crossed the floor with cruel patience, finally stopping next to his bed. Acting on a sudden urge despite everything within him that warned against it, Scott lifted his blanket just enough to peek out.

Both Kale and Chris were woken by the scream, but since Kale had fallen asleep fully dressed, he arrived at Scott's room first. He flicked on the light—and his mouth dropped open in horror. Chris arrived a moment later, shattering the silence with a whisper.

"\_My God.\_"



Scott's corpse lay on the bed with a sheet twisted tightly around the neck. Eyes bulged out of his sickeningly blue face, clearly conveying unimaginable fear. Worst of all, the sheet that had strangled Scott's life out of him was held above his head with his own two hands. Kale shut his eyes tight and turned away.

"I killed him with that \_stupid\_ game."

"No," Chris said, placing a hand on Kale's shoulder from behind, "it wasn't you, it was his own guilt. You can't keep a secret like that locked away for years without it eating you hollow."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Deep space can mess with your mind." Chris shook his head sadly. "Heck, if he'd told the UNSC the truth, they never would have let him leave Earth."

After muttering a heart-felt prayer for Scott's family, Kale walked away from the room, followed closely by Chris. Although neither of them mentioned it, they both understood that certain facts concerning this terrible night would be left out of their official report. There would be no mention of Kale's ill-fated game, nor would they reveal the tragic story that Scott had told. But there was one thing that would be kept the most secret of all--so secret in fact, that aside from an exchange of knowing looks, they had not even mentioned it to each other.

How \_did\_ the smell of formaldehyde get into Scott's room when the nearest supply of the chemical was light years away? It, like so many other questions that night, was best left unasked.

C.T. Clown

### 3. A Tale of Death

**\*\*Short Tales of Terror (3): A Tale of Death\*\***

**\*\*\_Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other.**

**\_\*\***

**> - Francis Bacon<p>**

Death. At once mankind's greatest mystery and greatest fear, its gaunt form stalks the shadowy edges of our nightmares and bends our imaginations toward the dark and unseemly. Like a loathsome, unwelcome guest, it has cast its pall over man's art, literature and song for many thousands of years--and little wonder. From the moment we are born, it stands vigil; waiting patiently for the day we will die. Regardless of fame, title or wealth, no one escapes notice. There are no loopholes, bribes or favors. Everyone who is born will die. Everyone who has life will eventually meet Death.

It is only a matter of time.

\* \* \*

>"So then they threw the four of us into these rectangular holes

they'd carved out of the ground. Them holes were about ten feet deep, with just enough back and forth room for some nervous pacingâ€”and believe me, we needed it." <p>Jeremy Hutchins took a much-needed breath and swept his eyes across the small group of newcomers huddled at the table.<p>

"Now, we'd been wondering why they'd taken us alive, and it wasn't long before we got our answer. You see, there's only one thing an Elite enjoys more than a kill, and that's a challenging kill. I guess four uninjured ODST's was too much to pass up. Still," he said, his face turning dark, "there ain't no unarmed man that can give one of them monsters a tussle. There was four of them Elites and four of us, so we divided up nice an' even. They moved slowly from hole to hole; one of them jumping in and the others watching and shouting like teenagers at a hockey game."

As if lost in the horrible memory, Jeremy lowered his head and stared wide-eyed at the middle of the table. "Startin' with poor old Sergeant Miller, they ripped those men to pieces. And I don't care what you say, you've never heard screaming like that; not in this world. Keep in mind that these were ODST's, an' I heard them cry out for their mommas like little kids. But that was only in the first moments. After that, it was nothing but high-pitched squeals as the wretches were dismembered alive and beaten with their own limbs." Jeremy looked at them again, fresh terror etched on his face. "I tell you, by the time they got to me, it seemed I'd spent days living in Hell, listening to the very cries of the damned. Finally, a Elite jumped into my pit andâ€”"

"I'm afraid it's time for your medication, Jeremy," a beautiful, brown-haired nurse said as she grabbed the handles on his wheelchair. "You can talk to your new friends later."

"But Stel, I want to talk to them now." He said, his face twisting into a childish pout. "They're all listening to me and it's such a good story."

Suppressing the urge to straighten up his curly black hair, Stella Weiss wheeled Jeremy away from the table, leaving the newcomers in expectant silence. Fortunately, they had already been given their medication and it was several moments before they realized he was gone.

"You know," Stella said smiling, "that's as close as I've heard you come to finishing that story. Have you finally found an ending?"

Jeremy scowled and shook his head. "Maybe, but not a good one. I can't use the one I want."

"Why's that?"

"I'm still alive." Swiveling his head around, he looked up at her with sadness. "Who would believe it?" Smiling like a mother consoling a child, Stella set aside patient-nurse regulation and brushed Jeremy's hair out of his eyes.

With over five hundred patients, Falston Ridge was the second largest psychiatric hospital in the UNSC; and it was only getting bigger. Military personnel suffer from mental illness at more than

twice the rate of civilians. Some people were never meant to endure the rigors of war. Unfortunately, the military has no reliable process for identifying such people and keeping them out of combat. This often led to panic and death on the battlefield. Those lucky enough to survive with their sanity intact were discharged or reassigned to the relative safety of a desk job. But for the small percentage who lost their minds, the only option was a facility like the Ridge. But as Stella looked at the patient she wheeled down the hall, she knew that he did not fit the usual profile. Former ODST Captain Jeremy Hutchins had not lost his sanity due to the pressures of war. No, war was the very place he thrived.

Before arriving six months earlier, Captain Hutchins had been one of the most decorated and experienced soldiers in the UNSC. But one night after a particularly brutal ground engagement, he wandered into camp alone; badly injured and babbling nonsense. Nobody except Jeremy and the members of his doomed squad knew the details of the failed mission, and since the distinguished ODST Captain could not produce a single intelligible sentence, the matter was never cleared up. But something happened to him in that dark, alien wilderness; something horrible enough to make a proven warrior cower in the back of his mind like a frightened child.

Stella pushed open a white door and wheeled Jeremy inside. The room was small with a white floor, white walls and a white ceiling. To the left of the bed was a small, all-white bathroom with a broken mirror.

"Climb into bed," she ordered, and then eyed the bathroom with concern. "I'll send Ed in to get that mirror replaced." Jeremy pulled the covers over his large frame and spoke with embarrassment.

"Sorry, Stel. It won't happen again."

"Jeremy, the next time you feel like hitting that mirror, push the 'Help' button beside the toilet instead. Then I can come and we can talk about whatever's bothering you."

"No, no, I don't want to talk about that. I need my medication now." As tears began to form his eyes, he rolled away from her and stared at the wall. She took the injection gun out of her pocket, placed it against his left arm and pulled the trigger. Looking at the broken mirror again, she felt her heart sink. This was the fifth time in less than a month, and that meant that Dr. Harris would recommend an increase in Jeremy's medication; pushing reality even further away. For most of her patients, that would have made little difference; but for Jeremy, whose sanity lurked just beneath the surface of his mind, it was like holding a drowning man underwater.

No, she would take care of the mirror herself, as she had the last two times. Any other course of action was bound to attract scrutiny, and if that happened, Dr. Harris might learn that Stella Marie Weiss, his most senior and trusted nurse, was not giving Jeremy Hutchins his prescribed increases in medication. As of today, in fact, she wasn't giving him any medication at all.

\* \* \*

>Strange, alien trees surrounded him; their bright red and green bark

evident even at night. Foliage created a thick, black canopy above his head and a crunching black carpet beneath his boots. He was running, but not fast enoughâ€”but then, who can outpace a voice?

<p><em>I've dug your grave too, Jeremy. Did you think I forgot?<em>

Faster and faster he ran, dodging the trees and their black leaves, trying to leave the voice behindâ€”the voice of Death.

\_There is no forgetting, Jeremy. There is no hiding.\_

This time the voice was closer and Jeremy could smell Death's rot and taste its decay on his tongue. A chill shot down his spine as Death's whisper hissed in his ear.

\_There is no rest!\_

Adrenaline poured into Jeremy's veins as panic took over; accelerating his heart rate and turning his mouth to cotton. The dull white sheets clung to his sweaty frame as he sat up and scanned every corner for an intruder; only to find that his eyes could not penetrate the darkness. A repulsive odor stung his nostrils and the disgusting savor of putrefaction lingered on his tongue. He lifted a trembling hand to his right ear. It felt like ice. The room, which was usually too warm, wasn't just cold; it was \_freezing.\_ Suddenly, a familiar metallic click came out of the darkness; shattering the silence like a hammer, and causing the hair on Jeremy's neck to stand on end.

It was the sound of his door closing.

Why would anyone be in his room at this time of night? That question, however, was quickly pushed aside by a much more terrifying consideration: what if it hadn't been the sound of somebody leaving, but rather somebody \_entering\_?

"H-hello?" Jeremy said in a thin voice, dreading a reply. None came. Surprised that he had the courage to move, he swung his legs off the bed and stood to his feet. As his eyes finally acclimated to the darkness, he noticed that only a fraction of the usual light shone through the small, square window on his door. \_They must have turned off the hallway lights by accident.\_ With that healthy, rational thought, the last remnants of the nightmare began drifting away like smoke in the wind. The former ODST walked over the door and peered out the small opening.

His scream woke every patient on the floor.

\* \* \*

>"Aren't you going to finish the story?" <p>As Jeremy emerged from his thoughts, he found himself at a table surrounded by the same curious newcomers he'd spoken to the day before.<p>

"Story?" He remembered sitting at a table with this odd little group, but the rest was lost in a fog.

A small man with a crew cut and a black mustache flashed a playful smile. "Now, now, that was a \_very\_ good story, and if it had been mine I would never, ever forget it; not in a billion

years!"

Jeremy's mouth almost dropped open as he saw a man with tattoos and face full of black stubble gush like a six year-old. \_These people act like children. What am I doing here?\_ Something deep inside warned him to play along; to pretend to be like those around him. To his surprise, acting came as naturally as breathing.

"Yeah, but I have lots of good stories and I sometimes forget which one I was telling."

"Oh," the man giggled, "then I'll help. You and your soldier friends were on this weird planet, with trees that had black bark and red leaves, andâ€"

"No," another man interrupted, his deep voice belying his childish manner. "The bark was red, the leaves were black and something was green." The mustached patient looked sullen, but the other four nodded in agreement. Deep voice smiled: the floor was now his. "And then they dug these holes shaped like rectangles and threw you guys in â€|"

As the patient began retelling the entire story, complete with his own distortions and embellishments, Jeremy felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Tommy heard you last night." The soft, reluctant voice came from the table behind him. Jeremy turned around to find a thin, clean-shaven man in his early thirties who had the nervous, shaky look of a person who would do almost anything for a cigarette.

"So what? I'm sure \_everybody\_ heard me scream."

"Yeah," the stranger said with a frown, "but they don't know \_why\_ you screamed." Pointing at his own chest several times with his right thumb, he whispered, "Tommy does, though. Tommy knows why."

Leaving the newcomers, Jeremy wheeled his chair closer to Tommy, causing the skittish little man to shrink backwards as if avoiding the plague. "So how do you know?" The patient leaned as close as he dared to Jeremy's ear and lowered his voice even further.

"Tommy sees a lot of things, but he isn't crazy like everyone else around here." A shudder reverberated through his body so forcefully that it reminded Jeremy of a dog shaking water off its body. After glancing fearfully around the room, he calmed enough to continue. "Usually Tommy isn't so scared, but right now he wishes that you would leave. Tommy thinks that if you leave, then it will leave with you."

"\_It\_?"

Tommy nodded his head slowly. "What you saw outside your door last night," his tear-filled eyes grew large as saucers, "\_Tommy saw it too.\_"

\_Sure you did, you little freak.\_ "Describe it for me then."

Lifting his eyes, Tommy stared intently over Jeremy's left shoulder and nearly stopped breathing. The former ODST followed the patient's

frightened gaze, but found only white walls and more crazy people. Nevertheless, as Tommy began to speak in a thin, reverent voice, his haunting stare did not waver.

"Tommy saw something wearing a black robe with a hood. Its face is h-hard to see. It's always in the sh-shadow of the h-hood, but Tommy thinks it's white like a s-skeleton or an old corpse." Blood drained from Jeremy's face. He had spoken to no one about the incident, not even Stella, and yet this weird little man somehow knew. "Tommy sees a lot of thingsâ€"things that would make most men faint, but this thing is much worse. It has a big curved knife that is always dripping blood." If possible, the man's eyes got even wider. "Tommy \_hates\_ looking at blood."

"This thing we've seen," Jeremy asked, looking at the cowering wretch with new sincerity, "does Tommy know what it is?" The patient rubbed a small cross tattooed on his forearm and nodded. But instead of answering, he mouthed a silent prayer. "Tommy, what is it? Is it Death?"

"Yes, but Tommy has seen Death many times. It always looks different, but it never looks like \_that.\_ It is happy, or sad, or rushed, but never angry; never evil." A horrible expression suddenly twisted across Tommy's face. Covering his eyes, he shrank back from Jeremy in terror. "Tommy doesn't want to talk anymore. Tommy wants you to \_leave\_."

Jeremy grabbed him by the arm. "Hey, I'm not finished yâ€"

"\_Get away from me!\_" Tommy screamed, yanking his arm away as if his life depended on it. As two male staffers converged on the frightened man, Jeremy wheeled himself back to his table.

"What did Jeremy do to you?" one of them asked as the other injected something into the patient's arm. Tommy, who now had both arms protecting his head as if the sky was about to fall, began to sob.

"N-nothing-ing. H-he d-did n-nothing."

"Tommy," one of them asked in a soothing voice, "if he didn't do anything to you, then why did you scream at him?"

Parting his arms just enough to reveal two horrified, bloodshot eyes, Tommy replied, "I wasn't screaming at \_him.\_"

\* \* \*

>Pushing Jeremy towards his room, Stella could not help but smile. One day without medication had brought about a change in her favorite patient that bordered on the miraculous. Even though her actions could have meant the loss of her job and possibly even permanent damage to Jeremy's mind, it had been a risk well worth taking.  
<p>"How did you feel today, Jeremy?" He looked up at Stella and smiled politely.<p>

"I'm feeling okay. Stel, I see a lot of patients walking around under their own power. Why do I have to use this wheelchair?"

\_It's about time you started wondering about stuff like that.\_

"Patients on certain medications are only allowed to walk around inside their rooms and during supervised exercise periods. Be thankful: some patients aren't even allowed to do \_that.\_ They're either in a wheelchair or in bed."

In response to some internal warning, Jeremy had spent the entire day acting as if he were a bona fide wacko. For some reason, however, he did not feel the need to pretend with Stella. Something told him that she was safe, and he had a lot of questions that needed answers.

"How'd I end up here, Stel?" he said, with all the earnest and expectation of a child asking about the existence of God. Arriving at his room, Stella pushed the door open and wheeled Jeremy inside.

"How much do you remember?"

"Names and vague, general stuff. When I look at you," he said, gesturing towards her with his right hand, "I get an impression of what you're like and who you are to me. It's that way with everyone." His face darkened. "Everything I remember about my life before living here comes from nightmares."

"Well," she replied as he climbed into bed, "for one, you were a highly decorated Captain in the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. And from what I gather, you were one of the best." She pulled up his right sleeve, revealing an elaborate tattoo. "That gold comet is the ODST symbol, and they won't slap that on just anybody. Getting into that unit is like trying to qualify for the Olympics. Every now and again someone will buy their way in or be admitted because of who they know but," Stella said as she flashed a rare sarcastic grin, "none of them last long. One trip planet-side in one of those capsule shaped human entry vehicles is usually enough to weed them out. Some even end up here."

Jeremy grunted in amusement. "You certainly know a lot about them."

"I have a lot of admiration for them. Nobody fights the Covenant harder." Her face changed slightly as she tried to mask her emotions. "ODST's give more to the UNSC than any two regular soldiers combined. Did you know that they aren't even allowed to get married?" Jeremy smiled.

"That does sound familiar. So," he asked, immediately guessing what she'd left unsaid, "what's his name?" Stella tried her best to look shocked, but the former ODST wasn't fooled. "It's not like I'm in a position to get him in any trouble. Talking to a confirmed nutcase is safer than confessing to a priest." She gave him a polite, humorless smile and dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I called him Boony. It was a nickname he got from his brother as a kid. Illegal relationships can get an ODST up to five years in prison, so I didn't dare call him by his real name." She paused for a moment. "But none of that matters anymore. A mutual friend called me five months ago to tell me Boony was dead, and just like that," she said, her face remarkably stoic, "after more than ten years of marriage, I'm left with nothing. No body, no grave, and no goodbye."

Not knowing what to say, Jeremy did what seemed most natural: he dug for information.

"What did Boony look like?"

She smiled. "A lot like you. He was big, with curly black hair. Well, it was curly when he was allowed to let it grow." She looked down at him with genuine affection. "I guess that's why you're my favorite patient. I know what you ODS'T's are put through and what you are deprived of, and I respect you for going through it. And it certainly doesn't hurt that you look so much like my man."

"For what it's worth," Jeremy said, noticing for the first time how beautiful his nurse was, "there probably isn't an ODS'T alive that \_wouldn't\_ risk prison to marry you."

"That wouldn't surprise me," she said as she headed for the door, "because most Helljumpers are barking mad."

\* \* \*

>Blood spurted out in streams; the pressure alternating with every beat of the doomed heart. Bones cracked loudly before jutting out of the flesh like ivory dipped in gore. An arm was yanked out at the shoulder joint with a loud <em>pop</em> and then completely dismembered from the body. Over the sickening sound of tearing flesh and the hellish screams of slaughter, Jeremy heard something far more horrible: the torturer's joyous laughter. Watching from behind, he saw a hooded, black-robed figure begin to work furiously on a helpless wretch tied to a stake in front of him. In between screams the prisoner begged for his life, but this only made the huge, hooded ghoul laugh harder. As the torture progressed, the cruelty progressed as well, and soon the man begged for death rather than life. But for now, even this was denied him, and the morbid spectacle continued with the patience of pure malice. Before long, begging was replaced by an unending cycle of screaming and then fighting for the breath to scream again. Jeremy had never felt such pity or sensed greater evil. The more the man suffered, the more his demonic torturer enjoyed it; until breathing, screaming and laughter stopped.

The large hooded figure moved, and as it did, Jeremy got his first look at the victim's face—and it took his breath away. Looming there before him dead, dismembered and tied to a stake at the bottom of a freshly dug grave was \_himself\_; and the dead returned the wide-eyed stare of the living. As Jeremy continued to gawk, the torturer turned around and laughed.

"\_Did you think I forgot?\_" Jeremy froze in fear. It was the voice from his nightmare. It was the face he's seen at his doorway after he woke. It was Death. In its right hand it held a long shaft with a curved, steel blade at the end. Blood glistened on blade and robe as Death smiled wide and white under the shadow of its hood. "\_I am coming for you. If you run, you will find yourself running to me. If you hide, you will find me in your hiding place.\_" Death's awful stench began to fill his nostrils and Jeremy moved backward, hitting the grave's wall after a single step. Again, he looked at the bloodied, limbless piece of meat tied to the stake; again, it took his breath away. "\_Did you think I forgot, Jeremy? There is no forgetting. There is no rest.\_"



Waking in the dark, Jeremy sat up and wiped sweat out of his eyes. Dread flooded his tortured mind, and like the rumble of an approaching train, it became steadily stronger.

Something was coming.

Jeremy threw off his sheets, walked over to his door and peered out the little window at the top. The lights in the hallway were off, but illumination from intersecting halls spilled in just enough to give it an eerie glow. A terrifying shadow grew larger as someone came down the hallway to his right. A foul, rotten stench began to permeate his room, and he tasted decaying flesh with every breath. As the shadow grew larger the temperature in his room plunged and Jeremy began to shiver. Icy fingers played symphonies of terror on his nerves, until the frigid fear seemed to chill even his heart. Finally, the thing came into view; tall, black and evil. Slowly, it raised its weapon and turned towards the room across the hall.

Towards Tommy's room.

Opening the locked door effortlessly, it walked in and Tommy's screams echoed through the hall like the cries of the damned. On and on it went, but nobody came to help; nobody answered his cries; until at last, all was silent and the silence was far more terrible than the screaming. Finally, the demon emerged, knife dripping and its feet slick with blood. It spoke, and even though it was outside a thick, metal door, Jeremy heard the eerie rasp of the words as if they were whispered in his ear.

"\_Tomorrow. I'll be waiting for you, Stella's man.\_"

Stumbling backwards in fright, Jeremy tangled his feet together and fell; smacking his head on the floor and returning to his dark and terrible dreams.

\* \* \*

>"Good morning, Jeremy," Dr. Stephen Harris said with a warm smile. His head still throbbing from a large bloody lump, the patient closed his eyes. Looking at the light hurt almost as much as trying to talk.  
<p>"Mornin' Doctor." Apparently, he'd hit his head pretty hard when he fainted the night before. Whatever they had given him for the pain was somewhat less than adequate. "Is Tommy okay?"<p>

"Tommy?" Harris' eyes narrowed. "How did you know about him?"

"His room is across from mine and I heard him screaming last night. Is he okay?"

"Well," the doctor searched for the right words, "Tommy somehow got a hold of a knife and cut himself up pretty bad."

"How bad?"

\_How bad?\_ How could he answer? If a security camera hadn't shown that nobody entered the room, they'd be treating it as a homicide: a homicide that hearkened back to Jack the Ripper.

"It was very bad. I'm afraid he passed away early this morning. But we aren't here to talk about Tommy. I want you to tell me what happened to \_you\_ last night."

Jeremy couldn't help but notice that even after recounting Tommy's horrible death, Dr. Harris still smiled from ear to ear. A couple of days before, this would have been a comfort, but now it seemed fake and deceptive. The way the doctor continuously shuffled his feet bugged him too. He'd never noticed it before, but now it set off alarms in his head. Harris' every action seemed to mean something, and some distant, recently awakened part of his brain began to decipher it like a code.

\_His smiles last too long, and they never involve his eyes: he's either being insincere or smiles out of habit. Nervous movement of lower extremities: good chance he's hiding something or planning to lie.\_

"Jeremy? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said, trying to quiet his mind. But he knew that something was wrong. All of a sudden he understood simple mannerisms the way most people understood words. It was as if he went to sleep for months and hadn't woken up until the last two days. He looked at the doctor and shook his head. "I just feel a little funny."

Dr. Harris smiled even wider and spoke as a father would to a young child. "Well, your head took quite a hit. Do you remember anything about last night?"

"I uh, had a nightmare. I thought I heard something by my door, went to check on it and â€¦ I saw something."

"What did you see?"

Since he was already a mental patient, Jeremy decided he had nothing to lose in telling the truth. "I think I saw Death."

"\_Death\_?" Dr. Harris gave him a quizzical look.

"Yes," Jeremy said nodding, "and I saw it enter Tommy's room."

"Well, help me out here," Harris said, trying to sound sincere, "what does Death look like?"

"A rotting corpse, or maybe a skeleton. It wore a black robe with a large hood, andâ€¦"

"And," the doctor interrupted, "a long stick with a curved blade at the end?" Jeremy nodded.

"Yes. Have you seen it too?"

"No," Dr. Harris said, chuckling softly, "I haven't. Don't you see, Jeremy; you've described the Grim Reaper. Human culture has personified Death as a scythe-wielding harvester of souls since the fourteenth century at the very latest. It's nothing more than a psychological expression of ingrained cultural imagery." Harris suddenly realized that he was talking way over his patient's head.

"I'm sorry. Did you understand any of that?"

To his surprise, Jeremy nodded. "Yeah," he replied, visibly embarrassed, "and you're right; it was probably just an extension of my dream."

Dr. Harris could hardly believe his ears. During a meeting just six days previous, this patient spoke like a seven year-old and spent the entire session gushing about the story he was going to tell his friends during free time. How could that same man grasp the cultural anthropomorphization of Death, or for that matter, a dream's continuing power over the waking mind? For a normal patient this rapid progress toward lucidity would be good—but former ODSST Captain Jeremy Hutchins was not a normal patient. For him, insanity guaranteed a place of comfort and safety. Sanity, on the other hand, would guarantee only a slow, painful death. In a sincere effort to maintain the former and prevent latter, Dr. Harris had deliberately kept the patient under a fog of mind numbing medications; and up until now it had worked. But for reasons that he did not have time to discover, the drugs were losing their affect. And since there were undoubtedly government spies throughout the \_Falston Ridge\_ facility, he would be putting his own life in danger if he failed to report the radical change in Captain Hutchins' condition.

He tapped a button on his desk. "Cathy? Could you wheel Jeremy out and let Stella know we are through?"

\_"I'll be right in."\_

"Thank you."

As Jeremy left, his newly awakened mind read the doctor's numerous yet subtle "tells"—and silent warning bells began to sound. \_Nervousness. Fear. Rationalization. Shame.\_ Although he was not sure what it all meant, his brain made one thing perfectly clear: his life was in danger, just as it had been in his nightmare the night before.

A moment after the door shut, Doctor Harris grabbed his phone and stared at the keypad as if it were a loaded gun. As a physician dedicated to the well-being of his patients, he knew that this went against everything he believed. As a husband and father of three, however, he also knew that he had little choice. After tapping out a series of numbers, he spoke in a voice as low as Death.

"I need to speak with Mr. Gray."

\_"One moment,"\_ a synthetic female voice replied with a coolness befitting an ONI AI. He waited less than a minute.

\_"Good morning, Dr. Harris. How is our patient?"\_

"Doing better, I'm afraid."

\_"Oh? And what does that mean?"\_

Harris closed his eyes and stroked his temples. "He is evidencing a much higher level of lucidity than he has in the past."

\_"How high?"\_

"Well â€|"

\_"High enough to answer questions?"\_

The reply was almost inaudible. "Yes, although it is unlikely that his memory has retâ€"

\_"Thank you, Doctor. We'll take it from here."\_

As the phone clicked off, Dr. Stephen Harris slumped back in his chair and tried in vain to silence his conscience. A phrase written on one of his diplomas caught his eye, filling him with shame: \_Do No Harm.\_

"Yeah," he replied to the damning words, "tell that to ONI."

\* \* \*

>Lying in his bed, Jeremy stared at the white ceiling and tried to calm his nerves. But his body, which had been in a state of alert ever since his meeting with Dr. Harris, continued pumping adrenaline into his veins as if making up for lost time. It was apparent that some part of his mind recognized an imminent threat, but like a baby that wakes screaming in the dark, he was ignorant of all but fear. His memory, however, was slowly returning, albeit in bits and pieces. Stella assured him that physical objects from his past, such as clothing or surroundings, would help speed the recovery processâ€but this hospital held nothing for him, save mocking relics of insanity. <p>Jeremy swung his legs off the bed and walked into his tiny bathroom. Gazing into the mirror, he carefully studied his appearance. Stern dark eyes; short, wavy black hair; handsome but slightly crooked nose that had been broken at least once. It was a face that could disappear easily in a crowd and fade quickly from a person's memory. His neck, however, was a much different story.<p>

Starting just below his right ear and extending past his Adams Apple was a long, jagged scar that looked like something you'd find on a Halloween costume. He probed it with his fingertipsâ€and images began crashing into his brain like rounds from a machine gun. In a single, ghastly torrent, Jeremy's memory returned; pushing his fragile mind to the breaking point and testing the strength of his newfound sanity. Backing out of the bathroom, Jeremy fell on his bed and waited for his head to stop buzzing. Mere moments before, he had been certain that his greatest need was the return of his memory.

He could not have been more wrong.

\_Forgetting\_ had assured life and safety: \_remembering\_ assured only Deathâ€and that didn't mean a tunnel leading to warm light and the dearly departed. Not for Jeremy; not after what he had done. Lying on his bed, he stared at the white ceiling and tried his best to put it all out of his mind and rest. But deep down inside he already knew: there is no forgetting.

There is no rest.

\* \* \*

>The entire mission had been born out of desperation for the simple fact that nobodyâ€"least of all ONIâ€"had foreseen the threat. With their increasingly sparse supply of up-to-date military hardware, rebel groups that had once posed a serious threat to UNSC power were now little more than an occasional nuisance. Mission accomplished.  
<p>Or so they thought.</p>

In their willingness to declare victory, the UNSC had failed to discern the truth. The rebel's dwindling military presence was not a systematic weakening, but rather, a systematic shift in strategy. Instead of opposing the UNSC with military might, the rebels had shifted their emphasis to something with more promise: infiltration. Slowly but relentlessly, they began moving their own people up through the UNSC ranks. By the time ONI finally learned what had happened, the rebels were already imbedded in every branch of the militaryâ€"including ONI itself.

Even as heads began to roll throughout the intelligence community, the groundwork for an effective response was being laid. Not surprisingly, ONI's opening move was to fight fire with fire. To find out which officers were actually traitors, they needed to get some of their own people into leadership among the rebels. Six top ODS'T's were recruited, trained in the art of counterintelligence and then sent into the rebel community.

For nearly three years, everything went well. But when three of the six ODS'T's were killed while making routine information drops, ONI smelled a rat. That the rebels would have identified one of them as a spy was not just possible, but a very real danger in the mission. But identifying three of them at the same time meant that, in all probability, one of the ODS'T's had been turned. This left them with only one option: abort the mission and recall the three surviving operatives.

Convinced that at least one of the elite soldiers was now a rebel sympathizer, ONI needed to find out who it was and then squeeze them for information. Even though this sort of interrogation was usually conducted by injecting the subject with one of several effective 'truth serums', that would not be the case with these three. In order to safeguard information held in the minds of undercover agents, a small device is implanted into the brain of every UNSC operative that constantly monitors their blood. If even trace amounts of a known interrogation chemical are detected, it releases poison into the agent's bloodstream; killing them instantly and thus protecting the information they carried.

Without the option of using drugs, ONI had to turn to a much older form of interrogation: torture. The questioning had to be kept secret if the UNSC was to have any chance of acting on the information they acquired, so they decided to conduct the grim proceedings during a ground engagement on an alien planet; far away from the actual fighting. Since they were ODS'T's, ONI knew that they would not break easily and thus, gave the interrogator a single governing rule: anything goes. One by one, the soldiers were subjected to unspeakable acts of cruelty, only to have the ODS'T who was identified as a rebel spy escape; first into the alien wilderness, and then into the recesses of his own mind.

So ONI waited for a day that it knew might never come: the day that ODS'T Captain Jeremy Hutchins was able to reveal what he knew. And

once he had screamed and begged and suffered enough, they would do the honors of ushering him into the Hell he had worked so hard to earn. They were prepared to wait a lifetime.

As it turned out, it took a little more than six months.

\* \* \*

>Troy took a bite out of his over-stuffed sandwich, leaned back in his comfortable chair and gave an obligatory glance towards the wall of security monitors in front of him. Snatching his bag of barbecue chips off the ground next to his chair, he crammed a handful into his mouth and then washed it down with a diet cola. It was 10:56 pm, and that meant that in less than five minutes Troy would actually pay some serious attention to one of the room's sixty-five screens: the one tuned to his favorite television show. Be that as it may, the portly young man felt no guilt for his lack of work. Every monitor in the room operated on the principle of motion. If, for instance, a patient managed to get out of his room at night, the monitor would not only click on, but also beep loudly and flash an irritating red light. Troy took a deep breath and smiled with satisfaction. Only twenty-three years of age and he had already found his dream job: Night Security Coordinator at <em>Falston Ridge.</em> No guns, no aliens, no superior officers and most importantly, no \_work.\_ And to think; he owed it all to a bunch of nut jobs.

"Troy Johnson?"

The Night Security Coordinator was so startled that he nearly dropped his sandwich. Twirling around in his comfortable chair, he regarded the visitor with disdain.

"You ever heard of knocking, mister?"

"Are you Troy Johnson?" the man persisted, with a flat expression that set off a warning buzzer in Troy's head. Brushing chips off of his shirt, he sat up straight.

"Uh, yeah."

"I work for Mr. Gray at the Office of Naval Intelligence." Troy nearly fell out of his chair.

"Oh, umm, sorry. What can I do for you?"

The man working for Mr. Gray smiled. "I'm here to do a routine security check. \_Falston Ridge\_ has several patients who possess extremely sensitive information. Mr. Gray wants to be sure that your surveillance system is capable of keeping them both safe and contained. I'll need you to leave me alone for about half an hour."

"Yeah," Troy said, grabbing what remained of his food and heading for the door. "It's all yours."

"Thank you."

After closing the door behind the worthless security guard, the visitor sat down in front of the control panel and began moving through the system with speed and precision. Within two minutes,

every security camera in the building was off, save for the one outside room 362—and that solitary feed appeared on the screen in front of him. Tapping a COM on his lapel, the visitor spoke in a low voice.

"Alarms and recording have been disabled. Remember; Mr. Gray wants Captain Hutchins alive and \_mostly\_ unharmed. Good luck." A man dressed as a nurse approached the door cautiously, nodded at the camera and then disappeared into the room. Less than a minute later, the man who worked for Mr. Gray watched in horror as ODSST Captain Jeremy Hutchins emerged from room 362 \_alone\_ and immediately left the viewing area of the only working camera in the building.

The ONI agent tapped his COM. "Be advised," he said, pounding furiously the computer keyboard to reactivate the cameras, "the subject has evaded agent Lucas and escaped into the hallway. Abandon the rendezvous and get inside the building immediately. I'm sealing off all exits in thirty-seconds."

"\_Where is he, sir?\_" one of the agents asked.

"When I know, you'll know."

The man working for Mr. Gray was under no illusions: if Captain Hutchins escaped, his own life was as good as over. ONI was not a forgiving organization, and his boss was not a forgiving man. No, Mr. Gray's specialty was eliminating problems, and if this operation failed —

To his relief, every screen in the room suddenly sprang to life. Like a man looking for his lost child, the ONI agent scanned each one—and came up empty.

\_Oh, God.\_

\* \* \*

>Stella rushed into her living room so fast that she nearly tripped on her white, floor-length nightgown. Having woken moments before to the sound of her door being kicked open, she was relieved to find Jeremy rather than one of the building's many dangerous mental patients sitting on her couch. Her relief disappeared, however, when she saw his terrified expression. <p>"What happened?" she asked, walking into her small kitchen to turn up the thermostat. For some reason her apartment was freezing.<p>

"I'm sorry, Stel, but I didn't have anywhere else to go." Jeremy shot a panicked glance at the door. "My God, it's broken! They'll see it!" He lowered his head and forced himself to take a deep breath.

Stella sat down next to him on the couch, and spoke calmly. "Who will see it, Jeremy?"

"ONI."

Her mouth dropped open. "\_ONI\_? Why would they—"

"Because they think I'm a traitor! My memory came back today—all of it." Jeremy placed his large right hand over his face. "And I wish to God that it hadn't."

Stella shook her head in confusion. "Why would they think you're a traitor?" Jeremy gave the door another nervous glance and then fixed weary eyes on the only person in the world he felt he could trust.

"Listen carefully, because I'm going to have to talk really fast."

\* \* \*

>The man who worked for Mr. Gray stared at the wall of empty monitors as if it were a firing squad. He keyed his COM and tried to speak to his men with assurance. "The subject is not on any of the cameras, so he must be hiding in one of the rooms. This place has five floors. I want Mick and Donaldson to start on the top level, and Smith and Bradley to start on the ground floor. I'll stay here and keep an eye on the cameras." For the first time, his voice betrayed his desperation. "Search <em>every<em> room, closet and dark corner until he's found. I cannot convey to you how important this man is to Mr. Gray." He took a deep breath. "Remember who you work for."

But something far more sinister than ONI lurked within the sterile white confines of \_Falston Ridge.\_ It too had a pressing appointment with Captain Hutchins, but unlike the agents, it did not search; it \_waited.\_ This was Death's time. Everything had led to this, just as surely as day leads to night. Jeremy would soon feel the cold, merciless horror of Death's embrace, and his screams would fail long before his heart did.

\* \* \*

>Jeremy shook his head sadly and, as he had throughout his story, continued to stare at the floor. "ONI was all but certain that one of the surviving ODS'T's had turned rebel and betrayed the others. They decided to take them planet-side during a ground engagement." For the first time, he lifted his head and looked Stella in the eye. "That way they could torture them for information as long as they needed, and tell anyone who asked that they died in the fight." Jeremy returned his gaze to the floor. "There are no words to describe what happened to those poor men. Their screams sounded inhuman; like the squealing of pigs during slaughter." He covered his face with his hands, as if the gesture alone would ward off the awful memory. "Everything went as expected, until they got to the last ODS'T."  
<p>Stella took one look at the jagged scar on Jeremy's neck and decided that she'd heard enough. Walking quickly to the closet by the entrance, she grabbed a shoebox off the top shelf and threw it on his lap. He pulled off the lid, and for the first time in hours he almost smiled. The box held an M6C Magnum pistol, complete with two fully loaded clips. It was <em>beautiful<em>.

"That was my wedding gift from Boony. Make sure that it's in working order while I get some clothes on. I'll only be a minute."

Five minutes later, Jeremy had already taken the weapon apart and reassembled it half a dozen times. He slapped a clip into the pistol, and stared at Stella's bedroom door impatiently. Why was it that women always took longer than they said they would?

At long last, Stella emerged from her room wearing jeans and a white blouse. She sat down on the couch and began putting her long brown



hair up in a ponytail.

"Stel," Jeremy said in a shaky voice, "you need to hear the rest of the story."

Stella put her hand gently on his shoulder. "I think I already figured it out. You were last ODS'T and when you somehow managed to escape, they assumed that you were the traitor."

Eyes squeezed shut and both hands balled into white-knuckled fists, Jeremy dropped his head towards the floor and shook it slowly.

"No, Stella. I was the butcher who tortured them." After a moment of suspended belief, Stella yanked her hand away and placed it over her suddenly gaping mouth. "I was one of the top counterintelligence officers in the ODS'T program. I was trained to tell if a person was lying by reading their body language, and that made me perfect for the assignment. After my first meeting with the three of them, I told ONI that they all had something to hide—something important. So we took them to that planet and I—I did what I had to."

Emotions collided within Stella, nearly tearing her in two. "My God, Jeremy. How could you?"

"They were all hiding something, but it wasn't what ONI thought." He looked into Stella's horrified face; his voice and body trembling with regret. "They all had wives. That's what they were hiding. Just wives. It was forbidden by the ODS'T's, so they all acted guilty." He turned his stare back to the floor and pounded a huge fist into his thigh with each syllable. "It was just wives!"

As Stella again shook her head in disbelief, freezing air blew against her neck from the shadows in the back of the room—and with the chill came a question.

"But why does ONI think you're a traitor?" As Stella spoke, her breath blew cold and foul on Jeremy's face: equal parts ice and rotting flesh. The former ODS'T's eyes darted fearfully around the room as terror all but paralyzed his mind.

He knew that chill. He knew that stench.

"Jeremy?"

"Because of ODS'T Sergeant Daniel Meecham; the last man I tortured." Amidst the unnatural darkness in the back of the apartment, a black, sinister shadow began to move.

"Just before he died, he confessed to being a rebel and said that I was the rebel contact within the ODS'T's. Even though it was obvious to me that he was lying about being a rebel, the three men with me from ONI believed him." He ran a finger along his scar. "Only their leader had any combat training, and I killed the other two before realized what was happening."

Jeremy was so caught up in the story that he didn't notice that the lights had dimmed and Stella's pistol was no longer in his lap.

"He gave me this scar, but I broke his neck. I got away, but the guilt for what I had done to those men was too much for my mind to

handle. That's how I ended upâ€" "

The thunder of a pistol interrupted his whispered confession, and Jeremy's right knee exploded; spraying blood and bone all over the room. An instant later the pistol barked again, this time destroying the other knee. With his legs no longer able to support his weight, Jeremy pitched forward, hit his head on the coffee table and finally collapsed onto his back. Wiping the blood from his eyes, he looked upâ€"and nearly died from shock.

Standing over Jeremy like an angel of Death was Stellaâ€"his lovely, doting nurse. The smoking gun in her dainty, feminine hands was steady as a rockâ€"and aimed straight at his head.

The air was cold; the stench was strong.

Nearly out of his mind with pain and lying in a pool of his own blood, Jeremy suddenly remembered something. It was a little detail that had meant nothing at the time, but nowâ€"now it meant \_everything.\_

\_WALLETS\_. Sergeant Daniel Meecham had that word tattooed across his chest in two-inch black letters. Jeremy looked up into the hate-filled eyes of his favorite nurseâ€"the beautiful \_STELLA W\_eissâ€"and knew that he would receive no mercy. Not now. Not ever. Teeth clenched in agony, he spoke one final word to Stella; to Death.

"Boony?"

The career nurse bent over and smashed the M6C Magnum pistol into the side of his head; knocking him unconscious and shattering his jaw. She stood upright and spat in his face.

"Boony."

Jeremy awoke to chilly, outdoor air. His entire body was tied to some sort of post, with his arms above his head and his feet suspended above the ground. Focus came slowly, but soon his eyes could see the earthen, dirt walls of a freshly dug pit and four men: three standing and one in a wheelchair. The man in the chair rolled up to him and flashed a cruel, cold smile. It was the man whose neck Jeremy had broken six months ago. It was Mr. Gray.

Looking up from his wheelchair, the ONI spook nodded towards one of the large men standing behind him. As that man took a moment to choose from the many shiny, sharp instruments of torture hanging from his tool belt, Mr. Gray looked into Jeremy's eyes and whispered as one would an inside joke to a friend in a crowded room. "Did you think I forgot, Jeremy? There is no forgetting. There is no hiding. \_There is no rest.\_"

C.T. Clown

End  
file.